

# Gunner's Last Christmas

by YouRang

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Summary: Gunner and Kenzie are together and everything is going great. Then a figure from the past, looking for revenge, sets his sights on Gunner's girl. Will Kenzie survive? Rated M for strong language, sex scenes, rape, torture, violence and kidnapping. Please review and tell me what you think. More chapters to come!

## 1. Chapter 1

Eight months and 5 missions had passed since Kenzie and Gunner had begun their relationship. The initial intensity had not faded, had in fact increased, and been joined by a comfortable feeling, a sense of having been together for years, the rookies assuming that Gunner and Kenzie had been lovers for years, such was the depth of their connection.

Even the most cynical among them (Barney), and the most protective of Kenzie (her brother, Lee) had to admit that Kenzie and Gunner were indeed soul mates, two halves of a whole, complementing each other perfectly with an almost spooky understanding of what the other was thinking, feeling or needing at any given time. Gunner was a changed man, having finally found peace. He was no less deadly or effective on the job, but had lost that dangerous, devil-may-care, either-I-live-or-I-die recklessness that by rights should have killed him years ago. He now had a warm body to return to, somebody to live for, and, having spent his whole live without such a thing, had no intentions of wasting it now. He treated Kenzie like a queen, and would have been totally whipped if Kenzie had been the type to demand unreasonably. Kenzie too had had a hard introduction to adult life but had kept it bottled inside for years, revealing her pain first to Gunner, and finally to Lee only at Gunner's gentle prodding some seven months ago. Lee had been devastated to learn of Kenzie's experience, saddened to learn that she had dealt with it by herself out of shame, and had vowed to step up as a brother and never be unavailable for advice or support again. Their relationship had never been better and Lee had privately thanked Gunner one night for

helping Kenzie draw out that painful memory.

As a result, Kenzie didn't take her relationship with Gunner for granted either, recognizing that she had won the lottery, having found the one she was meant to be with.

They both had their problems however, and argued at times, but never seriously and never without indulging in hot make-up sex afterwards. In fact, Gunner would often accuse Kenzie of picking a fight just for the pleasure of the make-up sex afterwards.

Soon after Gunner had returned from his first job after meeting Kenzie, she had stepped down from the Remington Gallery, sold her loft in Manhattan for an embarrassing profit and bought a pretty little shotgun house in the Uptown neighbourhood of New Orleans.

With help from the crew when they were home, she was gradually renovating, restoring the house to its original splendour. She was in no real hurry, enjoying it when everyone was all together at the house, arguing good naturedly about tiles, or wall paint or once, memorably, about the proper placement of the claw foot tub in the ensuite. The vote had been split down the middle with half thinking the foot of the tub should face the door, the other half saying the head, and had ended with Lee and Toll in the tub, facing each other, both arguing their point of view, slapping at each other's hands and threatening mayhem.

Kenzie had finally collapsed, laughing, in Gunner's arms, who, overcome himself, had stumbled and slid down the wall just outside the ensuite, tears streaking his cheeks. Barney had just stood there, shaking his head and trying to look stern while Caesar, Doc and Tool had guffawed, egging the two combatants on.

Mars and Thorn, who'd been setting up her stereo, had come upstairs to see what the problem was and Smilee and Luna, who'd just returned from a quick run to the hardware store, poked their heads into the master bedroom as well, eyebrows raised.

"Enough!" Barney had finally growled, shaking his head. "You sure you want our help Kenzie?"

"Of course, I love having my boys around." Kenzie had grinned up from Gunner's lap, still sprawled on the floor. The doorbell rang then and Gunner had grunted loudly as Kenzie leapt to her feet, elbowing his jaw on the way.

"Oh sorry, Baby! I'll be right back!" Kenzie disappeared down the hall.

"Dangerous little wench." Gunner had growled after her, his lips pulled back in a wolf smile.

A few minutes later Kenzie yelled up the stairs, "Come and get it!"

Intrigued, the boys had pushed and fought their way downstairs to find that Kenzie had ordered a dozen pizzas from their favourite place and laid out plates.

"Alright," Gunner had said, grabbing Kenzie around the waist, "you're forgiven for almost breaking my jaw."

"As if I could crack that granite." Kenzie had snorted, standing up on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on the affected jaw line.  
"Better?"

"I'll take it out of you tonight." Gunner had promised, causing a round of groans from the boys.

"You let him kiss you with that mouth?" Lee had asked, mock-indignant.

"Among other things," Kenzie had replied, laughing.

Having supplemented her scholarship to Yale with working as a body-piercer and eventually apprenticing as a tattoo artist, Kenzie took it up again once she'd moved to New Orleans. Tool had welcomed her with open arms, giving Kenzie her own room in the shop to set up in and, once she'd settled, bringing her on as his own apprentice. She worked part-time only, not needing the money, only the activity and took some medic and first-aid courses on the side to be of help when the team returned from their missions with injuries.

Although Kenzie was eventually filled in completely on what the team did on their missions, she'd not thought any different of them for it, and provided much needed tranquility when they returned. She cooked homemade meals for them both before they left and when they returned, help dress their wounds and even began to tattoo some of them. She checked up on Lacy and Caesar's family while they were gone and even kept Tool company when he was feeling nostalgic about the past.

In short, life was good. The original team had all accepted Kenzie as a sister, with the exception of Barney and Tool, who considered her a daughter; and the rookies thought of her as a quasi-mother, even with her similar in age to them. Gunner, of course, loved her more than anything and was truly contented, for the first time in his life.

The Expendables left that morning for another mission, one that barring complications should be a quick in-and-out.

Gunner had had an unusually difficult time leaving Kenzie that morning. They'd said their goodbyes the night before, numerous times, with one almost frantic round of rough sex followed by slow lovemaking where Gunner had done his best to convey his feelings to Kenzie as well as memorize every pore of her body to carry him through until he returned home. That morning he hadn't wanted to move, had a vague sense of unease, a gut feeling of dread. He remained in bed, holding the sleeping Kenzie in his arms until he was late, then had reluctantly pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder and climbed out. After dressing he'd moved back to the bedside and leaned down, gently tucking a stray lock of Kenzie's hair behind her ear and kissed her forehead, his lips lingering as he closed his eyes and inhaled her dizzying scent. Finally, gritting his teeth, he'd left, needing to speed to make it to the hanger on time.

Catcalls and whoops had greeted him when he'd finally arrived, the last one.

"Christ man, if it takes you that long to get some in the morning, you'd better start earlier!" Caesar called, laughing and fist bumping Toll.

Gunner curled his lip and flipped them off.

"Quit it! Get in the plane!" Barney bellowed.

Takeoff was uneventful, the crew settling into their accustomed spots, pulling out various items or tasks to occupy themselves until landing. Gunner sharpened his knife uneasily, still feeling a small knot of dread in his stomach.

"Hey Gunner, you alright?" Toll asked, serious now. Since Kenzie, Gunner had never been in such a dark mood, usually smiling, eager to get 'this shit' done so he could get back to 'his baby'.

"Just got this feeling." Gunner muttered.

"What?"

Gunner stopped sharpening and looked up, but Caesar interrupted his reply.

"I was just bugging you man, quit looking like that. Kenzie's a fine woman, you're lucky to go home to her."

"Yeah, damn right you're lucky! When you going to hurry up and make an honest woman outta my sister?" Lee bellowed from the cockpit.

This was an old argument, but this time Gunner answered with more than a middle finger or grunt.

Reaching into his vest pocket, he pulled out a small box and tossed it to Toll.

"As soon as we get home from this one, I'm going to ask her."

Gently, Toll opened the box, Caesar scooting closer for a better look. The whole crew fell silent, stunned by Gunner's revelation. Even Barney and Lee turned to look back thru the cockpit doorway.

"Holy shit man!" Caesar cried. "This must have set you back!"

The crew craned for a better look, smiling and calling out congratulations.

"She ain't said yes yet," Gunner growled, some good humour returning, then "hold it up to the light and look closer."

Obeying, Toll narrowed his eyes a moment. "Oh shit. Man, there's a dragonfly in there! How'd they get that in the damn diamond?"

"I've heard of those!" Caesar grabbed Toll's wrist, angling the ring to see for himself. "It's a laser imprint inside the diamond, right? It's this new thing!"

"Yeah" Thorn entered the conversation, "the waiting list on these is crazy, and only one lab is able to do it so far. They aren't cheap man!"

"No," Gunner agreed, "and the wait was insane, I ordered it six months ago."

"Good for you man, seriously." Toll said, returning the ring carefully.

"Can I see?" Luna asked shyly, moving to Gunner's side.

Smiling, Gunner held out the box and Luna took it, tilting it and squinting.

"Oh wow, yeah! There it is! Does Kenzie like dragonflies?"

"Yeah, practically obsessed." Gunner replied. "She just finished this new dragonfly tattoo design with Tool." He didn't tell, and never would, that the reason Kenzie was so obsessed with dragonflies was because she had a cafe-au-lait birthmark just under her left nipple in the shape of one. It was one of Gunner's favourite places to kiss and one of Kenzie's favourite places to be kissed. Gunner's heart sped up remembering touching his lips and tongue to that mark last night, feeling Kenzie curl her fingers into his hair and sigh his name.

"You hear that?" Barney asked Lee, turning back to look out the windshield again.

"Yeah, to be expected I guess." Lee replied.

"And you're okay with that?"

Lee paused, thinking. "Yeah, I am. Gunner's clean, he's told Kenzie about his past and she's good with it. It's obvious they fuckin' adore each other. Christ, if anything happens to one of them... I've never seen the big jerk so happy, have you?"

"No. "Barney admitted.

"He'd never hurt her, ever, or go back to that crank shit as long as she's around." Lee added.

"Yeah," Barney agreed. "He's going to be your brother, you know, for real."

"S'alright." Lee replied easily. "Big bastard kinda grows on you when he's not being an asshole."

Barney laughed, holding out his forearm for Lee to bump. In truth, Barney was happy for Gunner too. He'd always felt bad that the big Swede was alone, had attributed half of the giant's problems to his solitary life. Since Kenzie had arrived, he'd done a total 180 and Barney, who'd known Gunner half his life, had never seen that spark in his eyes before, that eagerness to just be alive. Christ, like Lee said, if anything ever happened to Kenzie, they'd have to put Gunner down like a rabid dog; he'd lose all semblance of sanity or control.

The mission went well. All the stars aligned and the crew was finished almost a full two days earlier than expected. The team was in high spirits as they returned to the plane, checking their weapons, repacking crates and getting ready to fly home early.

Then the phone rang.

Years earlier, when satellite phone technology was new, Barney and Tool had set up a special phone. It had its own number and ring tone, and was charged and maintained along with the other phones.

It was the emergency only, defcon one, call-this-only-if-the-world's-ending phone and today it rang.

As its unique ring tone filled the air the original crew stopped in their tracks, heads snapping to stare as Barney sprinted to answer it.

"What? What is it?" Smilee asked, confused, as he nearly tripped over a crate that Toll had dropped.

"It's the Fan phone." Lee answered.

"Fan phone?" Smilee shot back, his confusion growing.

"As in 'The Shit's Hit the Fan' phone." Gunner replied.

"Never heard it ring before." Lee added.

They could hear Barney, pacing in the shadows of the wing.

"Tool?... What? When?... Do you know who?... Fuck! Alright, we'll be there in twelve hours. Let me know the second anything changes!"

Barney reappeared, the phone gripped tightly in his hand.

"Listen up! I want wheels up in ten! Move it! Lee, Gunner, come over here!"

Glancing at each other, Lee and Gunner hustled over to Barney who had retreated into the shadows again.

"What's up?" Lee asked, dead serious.

Barney took a deep breath, meeting both men's eyes before he spoke. "Something's happened to Kenzie."

## 2. Chapter 2

Lee blew out a sharp breath while Gunner hissed, "what do you mean 'something's happened'?"

"She had an appointment with Tool at one today, didn't show. Tool went over at two, found the house trashed. Said it looks like she put up a hell of a fight. Tool found her watch, the strap was broken, said the time was stopped at 9:34 pm... there was a note..."

"What'd it say?" Lee demanded.

"I've taken the bitch, more to come..."

With an incoherent snarl, Gunner rotated and punched at a row of lockers beside him. The metal lockers buckled inward, breaking loose from the wall and falling with a crash.

The crew faltered, heads turning. Lee glanced between Barney and Gunner. Knowing he had only seconds to diffuse this before Gunner was unreachable, Barney spoke quickly.

"Gunner, you need to get it together. Kenzie needs you to keep it together. You can't lose it now...Gunner!"

Gunner stood, head down, breathing hard, fists clenching and unclenching almost spasmodically. After a long moment, he raised his head, his expression unreadable.

"Let's go." He said tonelessly.

"Gunner?"

"Let's go!" He repeated. Without another word, Gunner strode past Lee and Barney. Reaching a crate that normally took two people to lift, Gunner bent and heaved it with a grunt, stomping up the ramp.

The crew stepped it up, and they were wheels up in nine minutes, forty-five seconds.

The flight back was quiet. The team spoke in whispers and only when necessary. After they'd hit cruising altitude, Barney came out of the cockpit and explained the situation.

"Smilee, once we're on the ground, you go get the fuel truck and refuel the plane. The rest of you, repack and restock. I want to be ready to go at a moment's notice. Got it?"

The crew answered affirmative and Barney returned to the cockpit.

Gunner sat alone, the furthest back in the plane he could. The air around him crackled with energy and the team sent worried glances back to him occasionally. After Barney's announcement, Luna had made to go to Gunner, offer some support, but Toll had caught her eye and shook his head '\_you don't want to go back there right now\_', and unhappily, Luna sat back down.

With the exception of one trip to the head, Gunner remained seated, silent and motionless, staring at the floor the entire flight.

It was the longest twelve hour trip in recent memory, but finally the plane touched down, not even rolling to a complete stop before Barney lowered the ramp and Smilee ducked out. The rest of the team spilled out behind him, scattering. They worked feverishly, and the restocking was done in record time. They were just finishing when a loud, wound-up motorcycle engine sounded.

Tool roared into the hanger, nearly laying his bike on its side as he stopped. All eyes turned to him as he scrambled off the bike, ripping

a laptop out of the saddlebag.

"They sent a video message!" He cried.

"Here!" Barney yelled back, sweeping a spot clean on the nearest table.

"Wait!" Thorn shouted, running into the plane, he returned a moment later with three laptops. He laid them out on the table in a line opposite Tool's and hooked them together with cords, running a forth cable to the original laptop. The team divided, some looking at the first laptop over Gunner's head; he'd dropped to his knees in front of the table, the rest crowding around Thorn's three. Tool hit a button.

"It's encrypted." Tool explained.

"Thorn, can you trace it?" Barney asked.

Thorn's fingers flew over the keys. "Istanbul...no, Seattle. Fuck! He's using slaves. He's hooked to home computers all over the world. The IP address changes every seven seconds, it's impossible to trace."

"Shit!" Barney barked. "Alright, everyone, look for anything distinguishing, anything that'll tell us where Kenzie's at."

An image appeared on Tool's laptop, duplicating on the three Thorn had set up. Grainy at first, it cleared as the video finished decrypting. Kenzie appeared on the screen, hanging by her wrists, nude, highlighted by a Halogen lamp. She hung limply, her feet about a foot off the ground. Her surroundings were dark, the light brutally illuminating her only. Although naked, she was so covered with dirt and blood and bruises that you could hardly tell. Her whole left side was black and blue, horribly bruised from armpit to knee. A bamboo cane lay on a table visible nearby, along with a whole assortment of wicked looking instruments. Blood pattered slowly to the ground beneath her.

An animal sound escaped Gunner and his body went limp, his head dropping, forehead thumping to the table.

A figure appeared beside Kenzie and stalked towards the camera out of the shadows. Gunner raised his head as the original team let out collective gasps and curses.

"What the fuck?!" Lee exclaimed.

"He's dead!" Caesar protested.

The dead man's face filled the screen. A wicked looking scar twisted the left side of his face, his left eye a milky white.

"Hello, Expendables." He spoke, his voice gravely. Stepping back and to the side slightly to show Kenzie's hanging form again, he grinned at the camera. "Like my handiwork? Believe me, I'm just getting started."

Gunner growled, low in his chest.



"Eight years ago, you fucks tried to kill me, well; you failed. I've been watching ever since, just waiting for the right time to pay you back. Two of you in particular. Lee Christmas!" He pointed to his scarred face. "You carved my goddamn face open like a fucking turkey! And you! Gunner Jensen, that grenade you tucked into my vest?" He held up his left hand, or what was left of it. His ring and pinkie fingers were missing, as well as that half of his palm. The remaining three fingers were twisted and scarred. "I didn't quite get rid of it in time. But I'm still alive and this opportunity was too sweet to pass up. Here she is, the sister of this one-" he pointed to his face, "and fucking this one." He held up his mangled hand again. He paused, then stepped back close to the camera, leaned down, his face filling the screen. "You'll never find us in time to save her, never; and I'm going to take out my revenge on your whore many, many times. You won't find her until the worms are done with her. No ransom, nothing, just her mind, then her body and soul."

He stepped back again, muscles showing through his sweat dampened shirt, square jaw arrogant. Grabbing Kenzie's hair, he tilted her head back, exposing her face. Her lips moved rapidly, her voice too low to make out.

"What you doin' there, angel? Chanting? Hail Mary's? Didn't know you were religious." He backhanded Kenzie savagely, silencing her, her body swinging like a piñata. Looking back at the camera, he saluted mockingly and the video ended.

Gunner groaned, a deep grieving tone that no one had ever heard him make before.

"Who is that?" Smilee demanded.

"His name is Arthur Saulter," Barney explained. "Eight years ago we were contracted to kill him."

"I thought we did." Toll noted.

"Alright, anyone see anything useful in the video?" Barney demanded.

"It looks like Kenzie's hanging from some kind of rail attached to the ceiling." Luna said.

"Yeah, and off of some kind of solid hook, like a meat hook." Toll added.

"What was she saying?" Smilee asked. "Hail Mary's? I didn't know you were Catholics, Lee."

"We're not." Lee answered.

"Thorn, can you go back to Kenzie talking, enhance what she's saying?" Barney asked.

"Yeah, I think so." Thorn replied. His fingers flew over the keyboard and the video reversed, Kenzie's wildly swinging body suddenly stopped by Saulter's savage backhand. Gunner closed his eyes and turned his head away. Thorn paused the video just as Saulter grabbed Kenzie's hair and lifted her head. An audio menu appeared onscreen and Thorn adjusted levels. "Okay, here goes."

The video began playing again, all background noise gone, Kenzie's voice louder and clearer than before, but still difficult to interpret. Gunner snapped his head back to the screen.

"Play that again!" He barked. "Enhance it more!"

Thorn's fingers danced, the video rewound again. Kenzie's voice was loud and clear, but the words made no sense.

"What's that, Latin?" Caesar asked, confused.

"It's Swedish! Good job, Baby!" Gunner cried. "Again, Thorn!"

Kenzie's voice played again, Gunner tilted his head, listening. "She's repeating the same thing over and over again. One more time Thorn, slower."

"Djungel? Uh, jungle!" Gunner translated, Lee scratching the word on a note pad.

"Anfallare slakteri?" Gunner repeated the phrase rapidly under his breath as he translated it in his head. "Striker slaughterhouse? Jungle striker slaughterhouse?"

"Does that mean anything to anyone?!" Barney yelled.

Thorn knocked out the three video screens, replaced them with multiple search engines instead and typed in Gunner's translation. "Uh, Striker's Slaughterhouse!" He called. "A small American meat-packing company, had two slaughterhouses, one in Alabama and the other in South Carolina. The Alabama one shut down in the eighties."

"There's no jungles in America." Lee growled.

Thorn typed rapidly, "Here we go, and they had a third...in Brazil! To capitalize on the Brazilian cattle market. The big guys pushed them out; it's been shut down since '76!"

"That's it!" Barney exclaimed. "Asses on the plane!"

The crew scrambled to their feet, grabbing the last pieces of cargo and thundering into the plane.

Barney clasped Tool's shoulder, "Stay here, Tool. Bring your kit in case we can treat Kenzie here, but have the truck ready in case we can't."

"Alright, brother." Tool replied, and then hugged Barney unexpectedly. "You get her home safe, dammit!"

Barney nodded and sprinted towards the plane, as he ran up to the cockpit he yelled, "Thorn, get me exact coordinates and an ETA!"

"Yes, sir!" Thorn yelled back, typing furiously.

Lee was half done an abridged take-off checklist and within minutes

they were in the air. Thorn appeared in the cockpit, gave Lee the exact coordinates.

"Recent satellite imagery shows a newly constructed airstrip right beside the slaughterhouse." Thorn reported.

"No," Barney replied. "Saulter's not expecting us to have figured his location out so fast. That would take away the element of surprise, any others nearby?"

Thorn answered a moment later, "Yeah, four clicks due west, there's a recently deconned rural airport. Airstrip looks a little short, but we should be okay."

"Alright, that's where we're going. Tell the team I'll be back there in a minute."

"Yes, sir." Thorn replied, leaving the cockpit.

Barney ran his plan by Lee, who agreed to it, then stepped into the back of the plane.

"Listen up! We've got just over ten hours flight time plus one refuelling stop. We're landing at a decommissioned rural airstrip four K due west of the target. Luna, Mars, you two stay with the plane, be ready to bring it to us when I radio you. The rest of you, we're humping it there and going in silent. Maintain secrecy as long as possible. We'll break into teams when we reach the slaughterhouse, got it?"

The team answered affirmative and Barney returned to the cockpit. The flight was tense, everyone nervous and anxious as they tried not to imagine the tortures Kenzie was experiencing. Gunner remained at the back of the plane, where he'd sat on the last flight, and alternated between sitting motionless and pacing obsessively.

They landed uneventfully on the aforementioned short airstrip Thorn had located.

"Alright," Barney counselled Luna and Mars. "Strips a little short for this old girl, you'll have to hit it hard and fast, will you be able to handle it?"

Glancing at each other, Luna and Mars nodded.

"Good, stay by the radio. Be ready to go the fuckin' instant I call in, got it?"

"Got it." Luna answered. "Just go get Kenzie safely...please."

Barney nodded and left. The crew hiked through the rainforest, switching point position frequently, hyper-alert. The slaughterhouse came into view, a large but underwhelming wooden structure surrounded by old wooden pens already reclaimed by the jungle, one side dominated by the new airstrip. The team quickly divided into teams and slipped into the building. They moved silently through the smaller hallways and rooms at the front of the structure, slicing throats, breaking necks and stabbing the guards they encountered. The team's paths all converged in the main slaughter room. Most of the

equipment had either been salvaged or had rusted into hunks in the humid jungle air, turning what had once been clearly delineated areas into a minefield. Near the back, Halogen lights burned. With a silent signal, Barney sent the teams forward, some slinking along the walls, others ducking from rusted pile to rusted pile. The guards were few and far between, Saulter overconfident in his hiding place; a fatal mistake. They were easily dispatched, eventually leaving only a core group of five guards in the immediate area of the lights, Saulter, and the hanging Kenzie. Saulter had the bamboo cane out again, was swinging it at Kenzie's right side, laughing as she cried out. Lee, Toll and Caesar wrestled with Gunner, holding him back, somehow remaining quiet enough that Saulter didn't hear.

"Gunner! Calm down or she dies, he'll hear us!" Lee hissed in Gunner's ear. Gunner froze, a snarl twisting his features, madness blazing in his eyes. With a gruff shake of his head, he clamped down hard on his fury, nodding to signal that he had himself under control. The only thing that could have reached him in this state was the threat of more harm coming to Kenzie. Nothing else could have penetrated the berserker rage.

"Luna, Mars, move in." Barney whispered into his radio, silencing Luna's reply.

At Barney's signal, the team moved in, silently overtaking the remaining five guards. The last guard, although he died silently; fell noisily, knocking over a metal bar that clanged on the cement floor.

Reacting instantly, Saulter dropped the bamboo cane and grabbed two items off the table. The team froze, all weapons pointed at Saulter, but Barney didn't need to tell anyone to hold their fire. Saulter had a sawed-off shotgun pointed at Kenzie's head with his left hand; its grip modified for his misshapen hand. In his right hand, ready for use, was a Japanese tanto, a short samurai sword.

"Well, I guess I wasn't as well hidden as I thought...drop your weapons." When nobody moved, he pressed the shotgun roughly at Kenzie's head. "Do it or I'm painting the walls!"

"Do it." Barney ordered, dropping his. The team followed suit and stood, glaring at Saulter. Saulter turned his gaze to Barney, Lee and Gunner, who stood together.

"Guess this is the end of the line." Saulter stated. He knew this would be his last hurrah; the Expendables would not make the same mistake twice and leave him alive again. He had one chance to hurt them. Tipping his head at the three, he turned his attention back to Kenzie and pulled the trigger.

"No!" Gunner cried, throwing himself forward.

### 3. Chapter 3

\*\*A/N: Thank you everyone for the positive reviews, I have a very long story itching to be wrote, so hopefully I get it all down for you! Apologies to anyone who knows Swedish if mine was wrong in the last story, I trusted Google Translate :) . I am a member of the camp that believes that Gunner is a good man deep down and only needs the

opportunity to have someone help him draw it out, therefore, the Gunner of my stories may seem a little less wild and psychotic than others, with less inclination to kill and more to love. My Gunner loves his 'baby' Kenzie more than his own life and might therefore react to situations involving her that don't seem to be normal for the blond giant that everyone loves; no, he hasn't lost his balls...he's gained a heart. :) \*\*

\*\*On a side note...have you all seen Command Performance? Holy sh!t, Dolph playing the drums is so freakin' hot! Is there nothing this blond Apollo can't do? :0\*\*

The shotgun misfired, and with astonishing speed, Saulter brought up the tanto and stabbed Kenzie in the abdomen, teeth showing in a crazed grin.

Gunner slammed into Saulter, the shotgun finally firing, pock marking a nearby wall, the tanto clattering onto the floor, spinning away. Knocked off balance, Saulter staggered backwards away from Kenzie. Ignoring him, Gunner turned to Kenzie, crying out. "Baby! Baby, you okay? Look at me!"

"Shoot!" Barney screamed, grabbing his gun. The entire team, minus Gunner, followed suit and began firing. Saulter's body jerked like he was being electrocuted. Finally, Barney held up his fist to cease fire, and Saulter's body, literally torn to pieces by dozens upon dozens of bullets, fell to the floor.

The crew turned to Gunner and Kenzie, watching anxiously. Gunner had managed to lift Kenzie off of the meat hook she'd been hung from and had collapsed on the floor, holding her in his lap.

"Let me see. Gunner! Let me check her!" Doc fell on his knees beside them, opening his medical kit.

The team formed a silent circle around them.

Doc pressed a stethoscope to Kenzie's chest. "Kenzie! Kenzie? Talk to me!" Doc said loudly. He produced a large wad of gauze and nudged aside Gunner's hand, covering the stab wound; he pulled Gunner's hand back over. "Keep pressure on it."

Returning back to Kenzie's head, Doc spoke again. "Kenzie! Stay awake! Look at me!" He listened with the stethoscope a moment, and then pressed his finger to Kenzie's throat.

Kenzie sighed, her eyelids fluttering. "Gunner..." she breathed.

"I'm here, Baby." Gunner sobbed, pressing his forehead to hers. She shuddered once.

"Kenzie?" Doc adjusted the stethoscope, his face grave. After a long moment, he sat back, his shoulders sinking. "She's gone."

"What?!" Lee demanded, elbowing past Barney, where he'd been pacing, trying to stay out of the way.

"She's gone." Doc groaned, standing. With a growl, he kicked out violently, sending the instrument table flying.

Lee stumbled forwards and fell on his knees beside Kenzie, motionless in Gunner's arms. Reaching out, Lee touched Kenzie's shoulder briefly, then stood again and stalked away, savagely kicking Saulter's corpse on his way by, spitting on it.

Clutching Kenzie to his chest, Gunner threw his head back and screamed, a keening Viking cry of anguish and mourning that both broke your heart and chilled your blood. His voice spent, he choked another sob and lowered his head to Kenzie's again, closing his eyes, tears spilling onto her face.

The team stood silently, stunned. Although it had been in the back of everyone's mind, no one had truly expected to fail to save Kenzie, and no one had ever thought they would see the big blonde Swede break, but he had; Kenzie's death had shattered him, hell had officially frozen over and the unthinkable had happened. The plane sounded overhead and with obvious effort, Barney spoke.

"C'mon...Gunner, we have to go."

Gunner remained motionless, not appearing to have heard, then slowly stood, still holding Kenzie to him. The team parted silently, allowing Gunner to pass through. They followed behind, like a funeral procession. They stepped outside into the full moonlight just as Luna and Mars jogged out of the plane. Luna opened her mouth to ask, but the team's expressions told her first. Silently, Gunner passed them and walked up the ramp. Luna followed, a hand to her mouth.

In a low voice, Barney gave the remaining team instructions and, with a grim delight, they complied. Moving through the structure, they poured out a dozen jerry cans of gasoline that had been stacked against a wall inside. That done, they met again by the plane.

"Give me that." Lee said quietly, taking the flare gun from Barney's hands. Reaching out, Barney rested a hand on Lee's shoulder a moment then turned and walked up the ramp, the team following. Gunner sat at the back, he'd wrapped Kenzie's body in a blanket and was holding her in his lap, against his chest. His head was lowered, resting on her covered form, and he didn't move as the team filed past.

Barney paused in front of him, then leaned forward and whispered, too quietly for anyone but Gunner to hear. Gunner nodded, his head still lowered. Slowly, Barney straightened then reached out, resting his hand on Gunner's head a moment before continuing up to the cockpit.

Luna was checking systems and gauges in the cockpit, sniffing. Hearing Barney enter, she turned to him, tears on her cheeks. Reaching out, Barney gently patted her cheek with his palm. Nodding, Luna stepped past him to sit with the team.

Lee was the last to enter, stopping in front of Gunner; he tenderly touched Kenzie's shoulder, then sighed and continued to the cockpit. Barney got the plane into the air, then circled back. Lee opened his side window then leaned out, firing the flare gun at the main doors. The spilled fuel ignited and, as Barney circled the plane again, the structure ignited and exploded. With a grunt of approval, Barney turned for home. After a while, Lee spoke, "Are we going to have

trouble with Gunner?"

"Not until we land and he has to give up Kenzie's body." Barney answered grimly.

The crew remained silent, partially out of sorrow, partially out of respect for Kenzie. Nobody was unaffected by the sadness, many wiping eyes and sniffing; others just staring at their hands.

Gunner remained silent, holding Kenzie to him. He'd exposed her face and she looked peaceful, eyes closed. At times Gunner would lower his face to Kenzie's, speak to her, too quietly for anyone to hear, then just rest his cheek against her hair, eyes closed. After a while, he'd raise his head again, rest it against the bulkhead behind him, tears shining on his cheeks.

Barney and Lee remained silent in the cockpit, speaking sporadically and only to communicate flight data. Lee stared out the windshield, to some he would be expressionless, but Barney knew him well and could clearly see the pain he was in. After a long silence, Lee finally spoke, the Caribbean Sea visible in all directions below them. "There was blood."

Barney turned his head to stare.

"That fuck raped her, who knows how many times?"

Seeing Lee needed no response, was just giving voice to his grief, Barney waited silently.

"Wish that bastard was still alive so we could kill him again. He died too fast." Lee turned to finally meet Barney's gaze. Barney nodded, agreeing, and Lee resumed his silent stare out the windshield.

Fifteen minutes from landing, Barney radioed Tool.

"Fifteen minutes out. Tool, you there?"

"I'm here brother, did you get Kenzie?"

Barney glanced at Lee, "Yeah."

"Is she...is she okay?"

"No...she's not, Tool."

Silence, then, "Did you make him suffer?"

Barney glanced again at a stone-faced Lee. "Not as much as he deserved. We've got a few minor injuries for you."

"How's Gunner?"

"Destroyed."

"Roger brother. I'm here waiting on you-" Tool's voice broke and the radio went quiet.

Fifteen minutes later, they had landed and taxied into the hanger,

dropped the ramp. "We'll do post-flight later." With a nod, Lee followed Barney from the cockpit. Barney stopped in front of Gunner, who sat with his eyes closed, head leaning against the bulkhead behind him.

"C'mon, Gunner. It's time."

Gunner opened his eyes and raised his head. Tenderly, he reached to caress Kenzie's cheek, then stopped. Leaning forward, he gently touched her throat; then, eyes wild, looked up. "Doc!" He yelled, "I think she's breathing!"

"What?!" Stumbling, almost tripping over his feet, Doc scrambled over, fumbling for his stethoscope and listened while the team stood motionless, collectively holding their breath. Doc felt for a pulse.

"Holy shit! She is, we gotta go!"

Chaos ensued, Barney sprinted for Tool's van, Gunner stood and hustled down the ramp, murmuring soothingly to Kenzie. Lee and Doc ran ahead, throwing open the van's back doors and jumping in; laying out blankets as Barney backed up close. Gently Gunner crawled into the back, Lee and Doc helping him lay Kenzie down on the blankets. Tool slammed the doors shut with a "Go, go, go!"

The rest of the crew stood dumbstruck as Barney accelerated away.

"Jesus Christ." Toll breathed.

Needing something to do, Smilee strode back into the plane, began unpacking crates. The rest jolted into motion and followed. Luna and Mars disappeared into the cockpit to finish post-flight. Tool pulled out his medical kit and began treating the mild injuries; everyone doing their best to keep busy.

An hour later, Tool's cell rang and the crew stopped dead, listening.

"How is she brother? Yeah...okay...okay, I'll tell them." Tool hung up, addressed the crew. "Kenzie's alive; she's in surgery. Lee's going home to Lacy and the baby, Doc's coming back here. Barney and Gunner are staying at the hospital. Barney said if you want; go home, we can finish unpacking later. He'll phone when she's out of surgery and he knows more."

With a heavy sigh Caesar spoke, "Think I'm going to go home, hold my wife and my kids." He swallowed hard and left.

Doc arrived and left just as quickly and, basically all done anyway, the crew trickled out; Tool promising to update them when Barney called again.

Locking up the hanger, Tool returned to his shop, sat heavily at his desk. At a loss for what to do, he grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and began to sketch. Inspiration struck and within minutes he'd completed his picture. Kenzie as a Valkyrie, leaning into a wind, her dragonfly wings spread, hair loose in waves. Looking up, Tool knew immediately he was going to paint this on the blank wall across from him. He'd



been contemplating what to paint there and this couldn't be more perfect. Gathering supplies, he began.

Barney and Gunner sat silently in the surgery wing's waiting room. Occasionally, Barney would get up and pace. "I'm gettin' a coffee, you want one?" He asked Gunner.

Gunner shook his head silently. Barney returned a few minutes later, ignoring Gunner's decline and bringing them both sandwiches and coffee. He set one of each beside Gunner and sat down heavily, unwrapping his sandwich and taking a huge bite.

Gunner reached over and grabbed his sandwich, "Thanks," he said quietly, taking a bite.

"Anytime." Barney replied.

They waited six hours. Finally, their regular doctor, Paul Barton, whom Barney paid a little extra on the side to keep on retainer at this private hospital, appeared. Blood stained his scrubs. "Barney, Gunner." He acknowledged tiredly, sitting down beside them.

"How is she, Paul?" Barney asked.

Knowing not to sugar-coat with these guys, Paul explained the situation. "Kenzie survived the surgery. She's in ICU; in a coma...frankly, I don't know how she's alive. That stab wound should have killed her within minutes. If this was on the books, she'd be in the medical journals...you said you thought she'd died?"

"Doc pronounced her when we first rescued her." Barney mumbled.

"How long ago?"

"Uh...seventeen hours now, we flew back from Brazil."

Paul blew out a breath. "No way she was dead a full eleven hours, then came back. Doc must have mispronounced. Easy to do in a stressful field situation. She was probably deeply comatose. We lost her a few times on the table, but she's a fighter. Lee's sister, isn't she?"

"Yeah," Barney replied.

"Can we see her?" Gunner spoke for the first time.

"Yeah, but like I said, she's in the ICU, so only a few visitors at a time and only for a little while. And stay out of the nurse's way. I imagine the rest of the team will be by eventually?"

"Yeah, I was just about to call them." Barney reached for his phone.

Paul nodded, having learned long ago that you couldn't keep this team away, not when one of their own was hurt, you could only limit the flow. The three men stood.

"She's your girlfriend, right Gunner?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, I imagine you're not going to want to leave her, so I'll have them bring in another bed."

"Thanks, Paul." Gunner replied lowly.

"I'll take you to her."

"Go ahead, I gotta call Tool." Barney motioned them forward.

With a nod Paul and Gunner turned away, disappeared down the hallway.

"Barney! Brother, tell me good news!" Tool yelled.

"She's alive, Tool." Barney replied, holding the phone away from his ear for a moment until Tool turned down the music screaming in the background.

"Thank God." Tool breathed.

"She's in a coma, Gunner's with her now and I'm just on my way to see her. You'll call the rest of the team?"

"Yeah, brother. You know we're all coming in right?"

"I know, Paul said fine, but just a few of you at a time."

"And Gunner's not going to leave her and make room is he?"

"You can ask him," Barney replied, grinning.

"Nah, I like my head attached to my shoulders," Tool replied, laughing. "I'll call the crew, we'll be in soon."

"Sounds good, remember she's in Surgical ICU, under Mackenzie Christmas."

"Yeah brother." Tool hung up.

Barney arrived at the ICU nurse's desk. "Mackenzie Christmas?"

"Pod two, room one." The nurse replied with a warm smile.

The ICU was divided into four pods, each containing three rooms, twelve total. A nurse sat inside each pod, responsible for the three rooms and patients, able to see all three at once thru large windows. The entire ICU wing was constructed like four large wagon wheels, with the main nurse's desk at the absolute centre. Barney found the room quickly. Paul was gone and Gunner was sitting at Kenzie's right side, holding her hand, stroking the back of it with his thumb. A cot was already set up against the far wall. It looked uncomfortable, but Gunner wouldn't care.

Kenzie lay motionless, a tube down her throat. Her chest moved mechanically with the ventilator. The artificial breathing machine making an unnerving Darth Vader like robotic hiss. Her right eye was taped shut and the left was swollen shut, the whole left side of her face bruised and swollen. Her wrists were heavily bandaged and her left leg lay outside the blankets, propped up on pillows and encased

in an air boot.

Paul appeared at the door and moved to stand at the foot of the bed. Barney pulled up the extra chair to Kenzie's left side and sat. "Her left tibia is cracked in two places." Paul explained, gesturing to the air boot. "And she has multiple flail ribs on the left side; along with extensive bruising...she was struck multiple times?"

"Yeah," Barney replied, offering no more of an explanation.

"She also, uh, was...she was also sexually assaulted...multiple times."

Gunner groaned.

"There was some damage done...the nurses will be drawing blood over the next few days to test for HIV, Hepatitis and other sexually transmitted diseases--"

Gunner swallowed a sob.

"And, in the next week or so, we'll perform a pregnancy test...I hope whoever did this has been made to pay for it." Paul said, working hard to keep his voice neutral. Barney nodded. "Good...do you have any questions before I go?"

"You said her ribs were 'flail'?" Barney asked.

"Flail means broken in more than one place. Some of Kenzie's ribs were basically floating in her chest cavity, no longer attached to her rib cage, but through some miracle, all the flail ribs were still attached to the main ribcage by splinters of bone and muscle tension, I've never seen it before, straight up luck. Anyway, they've all been realigned and wired into place, but will take longer to heal than regular broken ribs. Flail ribs usually cause what we call a 'flail chest', a dangerous condition where the broken section of ribs don't expand with the rest of the ribcage, and potentially causes collapsed lungs or embolisms, but Kenzie seems to have avoided this too...some good news, anyway."

"Thanks, Paul." Barney murmured. Gunner didn't seem to have heard any of this; he was concentrating solely on Kenzie, stroking her forearm and murmuring to her too softly for Paul or Barney to hear.

"I have to go, but I'll be in later to check on Kenzie. If you need to get a hold of me, the nurses will find me. I'll see you two later."

Barney stood, held out his hand, "Thanks again, Paul."

Gunner, with effort, turned to acknowledge Paul. "Thank you, Paul, appreciate all this."

"Get some sleep Gunner."

Gunner shook his head, returning his gaze to Kenzie. Looking unsurprised, Paul nodded at Barney, then left. Barney sat back down, gently rested his hand on Kenzie's left forearm, careful to avoid the bruises.

"I must have made a thousand deals with her on the flight back." Gunner said, his voice raspy.

Barney raised his eyes to gaze at Gunner, whose eyes never left Kenzie's face.

"I kept saying to her, 'Please baby, just come back to me and I'll retire...please Kenzie, just stay alive and everything will be okay...please baby, stay with me and we'll go on that trip you wanted, to see those Scottish castles...please baby, don't leave me, don't go where I can't follow'... And the pregnancy test? What if it's positive? Knowing the baby could be mine, or that piece of shits? Could you abort a pregnancy if there was a 50% chance it's your own child? What do you do? And HIV, hepatitis?" Gunner's voice broke and he closed his eyes, a single tear streaking down his cheek.

"She'll make it through this; you both will...you're fighters." Barney said, his voice low, fighting to keep it from breaking. He had never seen Gunner so defeated, so broken; it was an unsettling, heartbreaking sight, like finding an abandoned, dead baby.

"If she does, I'm retiring...and if she doesn't, I'm still done."

#### 4. Chapter 4

Barney opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a quiet knock on the door. Turning his head, he saw Lee and Tool. He glanced back at Gunner, but he'd already turned his attention back to Kenzie. Barney stood and ushered the two men back outside to the others in the waiting room. Solemnly, he filled in the team on what the doctor had said. After a long pause he added, "You can go see her, a few at a time."

"Go ahead Lee, Tool." The team agreed.

Taking a steadying breath, Lee turned and walked into Kenzie's room, Tool following gravely behind. Gunner glanced up as they entered, and offered a wan smile. It was too much for Tool. Focussing on Barney he said, "C'mon Barn, I'll give you a ride home. You need to get some sleep; you're dead on your feet."

Exhausted, Barney nodded in agreement.

"You too, Gunner." Lee added.

"I'm not leaving her." Gunner growled, his voice low and dangerous.

"Just for awhile, take a shower, pack some clothes and I'll bring you right back. You can't stay here in your combat suit."

Gunner glanced down at himself in surprise, having forgotten.

"I'll stay with Kenzie until you get back, Gunner." Luna said from the door.

"Me too." Added Thorn.

Reluctantly, Gunner nodded. Standing, he leaned down and murmured to Kenzie, pressing his lips to her forehead, then turned and rested a hand on Luna and Thorn's shoulders, nodding his thanks. They nodded silently back and moved to sit in the two vacant chairs.

The team came by in small groups, staying only minutes and then leaving sadly. An hour later, Gunner returned, freshly showered and carrying a small gym bag. He stood at the doorway to Kenzie's room for a moment and watched. The rest of the team had either gone home or fallen asleep in the waiting room, but as they'd promised, Luna and Thorn had stayed. Thorn was talking, telling a story to the girls, acting as if Kenzie was awake to hear. Luna giggled at the funny parts, clasping Kenzie's hand and startled slightly when she noticed Gunner. He smiled encouragingly and stepped into the room, moving to sit on the cot. Thorn's story was almost done, but Gunner got to hear the end of it and found himself genuinely laughing as Thorn told how he and his brother had managed to not only burn a small hole into their father's head with a magnifying glass and the sun, but had also managed to get their youngest brother blamed for it. After a few minutes of companionable silence following the story's end Luna and Thorn left, promising Kenzie that they'd be back.

A week passed. Kenzie remained in a coma but had been taken off the mechanical ventilator after 4 days, now able to breathe on her own. Gunner had remained glued to her side, sleeping either in the uncomfortable chair beside the bed or on the uncomfortable cot. He left only to shower or use the bathroom. The team brought him food and drinks when they visited. Lee stayed as much as he could, but the baby was teething and Lacy was stressed, needed help, so Gunner tried to keep him updated with regular texts. The crew visited often, one or two different people popping in fairly regularly during the day.

During their alone time, when nobody else was around, Gunner talked to Kenzie as if she were listening and responding, telling her everything and nothing. In dark moments he begged her to stay with him, clasping her hand to his cheek, in lighter times planning out loud what they'd do and where they'd go once she had recovered. The blood tests all came back negative for STDs and Paul reported that Kenzie's wounds were healing as well as could be expected. Her continued comatose state was beginning to worry him. It was still too soon to perform a pregnancy test and that weighed heavily on Gunner's mind.

Mid-afternoon of the seventh day, Gunner drowsed beside Kenzie's bed, his head resting on the bed beside her hip, his hand on her thigh, when he felt her twitch. Startled, Gunner sat up, blinking.

"Kenzie?"

Kenzie's eyes were open, staring blankly forward. Upon hearing Gunner's voice, her gaze slowly turned to him. "Gunner..." She whispered.

"Kenzie? Baby, you're awake!" Gunner exclaimed, clamping down hard on the desperate impulse to pull her from the bed into his arms.

"You found me." She whispered, a tear trickling down her

cheek.

"Yeah, baby. We did." Gunner crooned, reaching out to tenderly cup her cheek, brushing the tear away with his thumb. He closed his eyes at the contact, his heart lightening for the first time in over a week.

Seeing a change in her readings, the nurse, an efficient British lady named Millie, bustled in. "Hello darling, you're awake I see. I'll call the doctor." She bustled back out.

"Was I in a coma or something?" Kenzie whispered, her voice slowing returning.

"Yeah, baby. You were out for seven days." Gunner murmured. Reaching out, he gently took her hand in his. "Do you remember what happened?"

Kenzie concentrated for a moment, absently curling the fingers of her free hand in the blankets. "Little bits...these men broke into the house, I fought with them, tried to remember what you'd shown me; but there were too many of them...then I was hanging in the dark room, this guy with a horrible scar was hitting me...oh!" Kenzie broke off, seemed to wilt right before Gunner's eyes. "He raped me Gunner; I lost count how many times...oh Jesus."

Gunner instinctively reached out to Kenzie but she flinched away, eyes wild and unfocussed. "No!" She cried out, then gasped in pain, clutching at her ribs.

Gunner froze in shock. His hands fluttered, uncertain, wanting nothing more than to pull Kenzie into his arms, but loathe to distress her any further. "Kenz? It's okay; I'm not going to hurt you..." Gunner soothed, struggling to stay calm.

Kenzie shook her head, blinking rapidly. Gunner felt a hand on his shoulder, turned to see Paul. The doctor nodded reassuringly.

"Kenzie, it's Dr. Barton." Paul spoke lowly, like he was calming a frightened wild animal. "You're safe; no one here is going to harm you."

"I know! I know that, I just can't..." Kenzie brought off, frustrated.

"It's okay, this is normal; it's going to take time. Now I need you to relax; your ribs have been severely broken and we don't want them to shift." Paul moved closer to the bedside, slowly sat in the vacant chair.

Kenzie drew in a shaky breath, wincing. Her fists clenched into the blankets and she stared fixedly down, slowly her body relaxed and her breaths became slower and deeper.

"Good, you're doing fine Kenzie." Paul soothed.

Suddenly finding it hard to breathe, Gunner stood up, clamoured from the room. Once outside the pod, he leaned against the wall, gasping. A few minutes later Paul joined him, standing quietly, waited until

Gunner had collected himself again.

"Her preliminary neurological tests are good. I've asked Kenzie if she'd like to meet with a therapist we have named Dr. Fellows, who specializes in traumatic assaults and she's agreed. I'd like you to speak with him as well."

"Me?" Gunner asked, confused. "Nothing happened to me."

"On the contrary, the woman you love was abducted, beaten, raped, presumed dead, just awoke from a week long coma and is afraid of your touch. I'd say a great deal has happened."

Gunner let out a ragged breath, sniffed and lowered his head; put his hands on his hips.

Paul rested a hand on his shoulder. "Kenzie will come back, but she's going to need time and expert help. You want to have a life with her?"

Gunner nodded, "I was going to propose when we got back from this last job, and then everything hit the fan."

Paul nodded, "She's strong, with the proper treatment and support I see her making a full recovery, but as I said, it will take time and her body will heal before her mind does. You can help her, but I recommend you speak with Dr. Fellows or one of his colleagues, if not to help yourself, then to be better able to help Kenzie."

"I didn't consider any of that...yeah, I'll see him."

"Alright, I'm going to go call him now...I can see that you love Kenzie very much, so what I'm about to tell you will be hard to swallow, but I recommend, until the dust settles, that you hold off on showing Kenzie physical affection. You saw how she just reacted. Don't leave her or abandon her by any means, but...I don't see her tolerating being touched right now, by anyone. It's not you, Gunner; remember that, she's just being overwhelmed by horrible memories right now."

Gunner took a deep steadying breath. Not touch Kenzie? Christ, since he'd gotten sober, Kenzie had become his addiction. He needed to be around her constantly, needed to feel her in his arms to stay sane. She was his grounding force, nothing was ever quite right until he was able to be with Kenzie, sitting with her, holding her, kissing her, burying himself inside her. It was foolish, he knew, and dangerous to be so dependant on another human being, but he loved Kenzie more than he'd ever loved anything or anyone and had given his entire heart and soul over to her. But, to help her, to help her regain herself, he would put himself through this hell, crawl over miles of broken glass, anything to see her restored to the woman he was so desperately and irrevocably in love with. "Okay," he murmured. "Whatever I need to do."

"Of course, if Dr. Fellows suggests a different path, follow that, he is the expert but...I appreciate the struggle this is going to be for you, I haven't missed how devoted you are to her. She's lucky to have you, Gunner."

"Fuck, I'm the lucky one." Gunner replied. Kenzie was smart enough,

hot enough and successful enough to have any man she wanted, why the hell she'd ever chosen Gunner was a mystery he'd never figured out.

Paul smiled encouragingly and left.

Gunner walked back to Kenzie's room, tentatively knocked on the door. Poking his head in, he smiled gently at her. "Can I come in?"

Not able to meet his eyes, Kenzie nodded. Gunner stepped inside, slowly sat in the nearest chair. Kenzie began to play with the blanket again and an awkward silence, something they'd never experienced together before, began to build.

Desperate to break the silence, Gunner spoke. "How are you feeling, baby?"

Kenzie flinched slightly, whether at Gunner's voice, him calling her 'baby' or at the question itself Gunner couldn't say and his heart broke a little more.

"Confused." She finally whispered. "I can't stop thinking about...I can't - " Her voice broke and she began to cry, letting go of the blanket and covering her face with her hands.

Unconsciously, Gunner reached for Kenzie and as his fingers brushed her shoulders she recoiled with a cry, her hands flying from her face.

"Oh, shit! Sorry, baby!" Gunner yanked his hands back, cursing himself. He held his hands up, "Sorry baby...I'm not touching you, calm down please!" He pleaded, eyes wide.

"I'm sorry -" Kenzie hiccupped, trembling. "I know you won't...Jesus, I can't turn it off!"

"Miss Christmas?" A new voice asked.

## 5. Chapter 5

\*\*A/N: No reviews lately...:(\*\*

Gunner and Kenzie both snapped their heads towards the voice. Standing there in the doorway was a small man in cords and a sweater. He had small wire-rimmed glasses and a neatly trimmed beard. "I'm Dr. Fellows, may I come in?"

"Uh...yeah." Kenzie mumbled, eyes red-rimmed and cheeks wet.

Gunner felt wetness on his own cheeks and wiped his hand across, realizing with surprise that he too was crying.

"And you must be Mr. Jensen."

"Gunner." He replied absently.

"Gunner," Dr. Fellows agreed, holding out his hand. Exhaling, Gunner shook it.



The doctor turned back to Kenzie. "And you are Mackenzie?"

"Just Kenzie." She answered quietly.

"Kenzie, Dr. Barton has told me that you wish to speak with me. That you've recently experienced some traumatic events."

Kenzie snorted derisively. "Yeah, you could say that, I can't even handle the man I love touching me right now."

Gunner's heart lifted slightly.

"Would you like to speak with me now?" Kenzie hesitated. "Alone?" He added softly.

Kenzie flashed Gunner a look that begged him to understand, then nodded. Gunner smiled reassuring, masking the stab of pain that shot through his chest. "I'll be outside."

"Thank you, Gunner." Dr. Fellows replied, turning back to Kenzie.

Gunner left the room, closing the door quietly behind him and exhaled shakily. "Keep it together, she said she loves you." He mumbled to himself. With all this mercenary, a gun for hire, had faced in his violent life, with all the dangerous situations he'd willingly stormed into, all the jobs he'd been a part of that had gone frighteningly sour, all the injuries he'd received, nothing scared him as much as the possibility that Kenzie might be lost to him, that her love for him could be overruled by her fear. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes and pulled out his cell phone. With everything that had just happened, he hadn't had a chance to tell the team that Kenzie had regained consciousness. He hit speed dial #2, Barney's number.

"Gunner." Barney drawled.

"Kenzie's awake."

"Really? She okay?" Barney's voice rose in excitement.

"More or less." Gunner mumbled.

"What's that mean?" Barney asked, lowering his voice again. Gunner heard voices rising in the background.

"You with the team?"

"Yeah, we're at Tool's." There was a fumbling sound, then Barney speaking faintly. "Yeah, she's awake, just give me a second! Okay, what do you mean by 'more or less'?" Barney asked, returning.

Quickly, working to keep his voice steady, Gunner recapped all that had just happened.

"Jesus, really?" Barney muttered, then. "You okay?"

"No, I'm freaking out. Christ Barn, if I lose her now - "

"Stop it!" Barney commanded. "You will not check out now." There was a few beats of silence, faint footfalls, the background noise fading; Barney had moved somewhere private. "Take a deep breath...okay...Kenzie is getting the help she needs, you need to be there for her, even if you can't touch her. You have to be patient, the poor girl was just drug to hell and back - " Gunner heard a horn honking in the background. "Look, the guys are halfway out the door, they all want to see her, is she up to visitors? I'll tell them to keep a distance."

"She's with that therapist now, I don't know how long they'll be...I think she'll be okay, she'd like to see everyone, a distraction, you know?"

"Alright, we'll be over soon...now, Gunner, are you alright?"

Gunner drew in a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "Yes." He finally answered.

"Alright, see you soon." Barney hung up.

Gunner paced up and down the hallway, anxiety driving him on. For the last eight months, whenever he'd felt like this, all he'd needed to do was pull Kenzie into his arms, bury his head in her hair and wait for the troubles to melt away; and now, in the cruellest irony, that was the one thing he could no longer do. Finding himself ridiculously close to tears, Gunner leaned against the nearest wall and scrubbed his hands across his face.

Their voices preceding them, the team rounded the corner and, clearing his throat, Gunner pushed away from the wall to meet them. Holding up his hands to slow them down he said, "She just meeting with the therapist now."

"She look okay?" Lee asked.

"Not bad, she's frustrated though."

"That will pass." A new voice spoke from behind Gunner, who turned to see Dr. Fellows approaching them.

"This is Dr. Fellows, Kenzie's therapist." Gunner said, introducing the team.

"Ah, another Christmas, you're related?"

"I'm her brother." Lee replied.

"Excellent, family will be very important in the near future."

"Doc, we're all her family." Lee answered.

"Even better." Dr. Fellows smiled.

"Can we see her?" Barney asked, the team rumbling agreement.

"Of course, she's asking for all of you, but please be sensitive to her needs, she's fearful of contact at present."

"What's that? Fearful of contact?" Barney asked.

"Due to the trauma Kenzie has experienced, she is hypersensitive to physical contact right now. I've had success with patients in the past relieving this sensitivity, but it does take time."

"So, don't touch her." Lee clarified.

"Yes, and maybe don't all crowd in there at once."

"No problem. Lee? You want to go first?" Barney asked.

"You too...Toll? Caesar?" Lee asked. "Gunner?"

Gunner shook his head, biting back the pain and leaned against the wall.

"'Kay, let's go." Toll pushed past; Lee, Caesar and Barney following.

The remaining Expendables eyed Gunner curiously. They'd all expected Gunner to be attached to Kenzie's hip...and here, he was keeping away.

"Gunner, can I speak to you privately?" Dr. Fellows asked.

Gunner nodded, following the therapist silently as he left the group.

Dr. Fellows continued a ways down the hallway, then turned to face Gunner. He gazed at Gunner, who met his eyes briefly before dropping them to the floor. Gunner was suddenly exhausted, and if he hadn't been used to pushing past discomfort, might have staggered and collapsed into the nearest chair.

"How are you doing?" Dr. Fellows finally asked, softly.

Gunner exhaled, forced a hand through his hair. "Not good, doc. The woman I love is terrified of me."

"On the contrary, Gunner, it's not you she's afraid of. She reiterated that a few times when we spoke. 'It's not Gunner, I know he'd never hurt me, he'd rather die.'" Dr. Fellows quoted. "It's her memories that she's struggling with, and right now any intimacy, even casual touching, is bringing all that to the forefront of her mind. In time, that will change, but, unfortunately for you, Gunner, you and physical intimacy are so tied together in Kenzie's mind that it may take a long time for her to be able to...tolerate you."

"Tolerate me?" Gunner repeated darkly.

"It's not an exact science, but there is a tremendous inner strength I see in Kenzie, this isn't her first time working through something heavy."

"No, it's not." Gunner mumbled.

Dr. Fellows took a deep breath. " I will be meeting with Kenzie daily for the foreseeable future, and you are welcome to speak to me whenever you need to as well. Here is my card for my office." He

extended a business card to Gunner, who hesitantly took it. With a final nod and shoulder pat, Dr. Fellows left, and Gunner returned to the group.

The days passed slowly. Kenzie remained in ICU for one more day and then was moved to a regular ward. The team visited frequently and Gunner stayed at Kenzie's bedside; ignoring the pain that bloomed in his chest every time she winced or flinched away from him, accepting her quiet apologies with a levity and positivity that he didn't feel, hiding the misery he was truly experiencing; Kenzie was dealing with enough right now and didn't need the added guilt of Gunner's sadness. After two weeks, Dr. Barton cleared Kenzie to go home, and the team was waiting at her house with a small party to celebrate as Gunner gently helped her through her front door, trying to overlook the tension in her muscles where his hands touched her. Kenzie made a special effort, circling the group and clasping hands, cautiously embracing some of them.

After everyone had trickled out, Gunner helped Kenzie to her bed, forced himself to step away when he heard her barely leashed moan of distress. He'd come to recognize that sound as a sign that Kenzie was getting overwhelmed and needed to be left alone. It reminded him of an animal in a trap.

"You'll be okay by yourself...Kenzie?" Gunner asked quietly, stopping himself from calling her baby; at best it sounded desperately hopeful, at worst a slap in the face at what they once had and now lost.

If Kenzie noticed Gunner's avoidance of her cherished nickname she made no comment, only nodded her head and whispered, "I'm fine, Gunner."

Nodding, Gunner left the room, closing the door behind him. As he stumbled downstairs, he groaned to himself, "No, baby, you're not."

## 6. Chapter 6

**\*\*A/N:** In the first chapter of this story I mentioned that Kenzie had a hard introduction to adult life, and kept it bottled up inside until Gunner drew it out of her...does anyone want to read that story as a oneshot?**\*\***

Less than a week after Kenzie moved home, Gunner, who'd all but moved into the shotgun before the attack, moved back out, retreating to his house along the bayou. When he found out, Lee was furious, roaring up to Gunner's on his Ducati and slamming the front door open.

"What da fuck, Gunna'? Ya abandon 'er just when she needs ya da most?" Lee growled, his accent thickening with his rage.

Gunner looked up wearily from the couch where he'd just collapsed, hoping to find some sleep.

Lee paced in front of him, his expression dangerous. "Well?"

With a groan Gunner sat up and covered his face with his hands, elbows resting on his knees; after a long moment he dropped his

hands. "When Lacy's hurt, or in pain, when she's sad or crying, what's the first thing you want to do?"

Lee paused.

"You want to hold her, right? Gather her in your arms, kiss her, tell her everything's going to be alright, even if that's a lie? You want to take away the pain anyway you can." Gunner held up his hands helplessly. "How can I do that? When I can't touch her? When I can't even touch the woman I love!? Do you have any fucking idea what that's doing to me? I don't trust myself around her anymore...I'm an addict and she's my favourite drug. I'm going to fuck up; forget or not care anymore and ... and screw up whatever progress she's made, turn her back into that wreck we pulled out of Brazil."

Lee stopped pacing and sat down on the couch beside Gunner. After a long moment of silence, Lee spoke. "I didn't think of that, you're right...if this was Lacy...I don't know, I'd have to save her from myself too. It's all you know to do, right? Try to comfort them anyway you can...sorry, man, I didn't appreciate that."

"Before all this," Gunner made a circle motion with his index finger, "we were never apart. Even when we were in different places, we were never APART. Now, she's behind this wall and I can hear her crying and I can't reach her. I've never felt so fucking helpless!" He buried his face in his hands again.

Lee reached over, resting a hand on Gunner's shoulder. "She'll get through this, we all will. Maybe we can ask Luna to stay with Kenz so she's not alone in that house - "

"I already did, she's on her way over." Gunner muttered.

Lee nodded, "tell me man, when this is all behind us, you still planning on asking Kenz to marry you?"

Gunner lifted his head, fixed Lee with a sour eye. "What makes you so sure she'll still want to?"

"She will, you too are the fuckin' definition of soul mates."

"I'll be your brother." Gunner mumbled, a small smile pulling at his lips.

"Yeah, alright." Lee replied easily. "You're not so bad now that Squeak's got you housebroke. Now get some sleep, you look like hell." Lee stood, walked back to the front door.

"Leave me alone then so I can." Gunner grumbled, laying back down and covering his face with a cushion.

Rolling his eyes, Lee shut the door behind him.

Kenzie met with Dr. Fellows daily at first, Luna or someone else from the team faithfully shuttling her back and forth to his private practice or to the hospital. He was impressed with her progress, but Kenzie felt frustrated. She missed Gunner and what they'd had, the passion that had meant even a small heated glance could lead to a fevered quickie; location be damned, like that memorable time in the back corner of the home renovation store when they'd been looking at

kitchen backsplashes. Not only the sex, but Kenzie just missed Gunner period, they were best friends as well as lovers, and the chasm between them wore at Kenzie's very psyche.

Seeing this, Dr. Fellows advised Kenzie and Gunner to spend casual time together; without any expected intimacy. They went slowly, Gunner joining Kenzie and Luna for lunch or more often, supper, Luna often excusing herself and leaving, allowing them time alone to talk. They'd settle on opposite sides of the couch afterwards to watch movies or television, sneaking looks at each other out of the corners of their eyes.

Gunner was having a hell of a time coping. He missed Kenzie so much and it tore at him constantly. He forced himself into sobriety, abandoning even alcohol; knowing one drink would lead to two, would lead to ten; would lead to him calling up an old dealer and emerging as Crankenstein again. More than once on a dark desperate night he'd find his phone in his hand, a dealer's old number half dialed, and he'd throw the phone away from himself in disgust; he'd gone through four phones so far in that manner; Thorn no longer commenting when Gunner silently handed him the old destroyed phone and its shiny replacement for data and information transfer. He threw himself into the most mundane of hobbies. He relandscaped his yard, adding a pond and a winding rock wall. Although never one to putter around weeding before, he started a garden and flowerbed, finding solace in the quiet repetition. \_Bend, pull weed, hoe. Bend, pull weed, hoe. \_He went to the gym daily, throwing himself into punishing workouts past the point of exhaustion, egging on sparring partners in the ring, fighting two or three separate guys a day. His appetite had gone to shit, he had no desire to eat; picked at his food whenever a plate was placed in front of him. As a result, the new gym time did not add muscle, but burned it away. Gunner started reading to fill in the dark hours at night when sleep eluded him and it was too dark outside to weed. Starting at first with his own meager collection, Gunner soon was borrowing from Toll's impressive library, usually finishing a book a night.

The team worried for him, their invitations to join them for cards or movie nights never flagging even though Gunner rarely took them up on them.

Three months today. Gunner stared at the calendar. He'd developed a bit of an obsession with watching the days stack up. Each day that passed without Kenzie was a fresh twist in the knife through his heart, another weight added to the already suffocating pile on his chest. Time had done nothing to lessen the agony, it had simply gone from a fresh arterial spray to a constant venous drip, the wound reopening daily when Gunner woke up with that side of the bed empty, the scent of Kenzie's green apple shampoo long since gone on the pillow; to be replaced instead by the unique tang of the heartbroken tears Gunner cried into it almost nightly.

This morning, 90 days since Gunner's world collapsed around him, found him on his knees in his living room; surrounded by piles of LPs. He'd decided to reorganize them, alphabetically by album before, now reverse-alphabetical by artist. That done, the bathroom got a ruthless and unnecessary scour; the floor clean enough to eat off of, scrubbed with a toothbrush just like the old military days. At lunchtime Gunner made himself a BLT, then stood and stared at it, having no appetite for food. Eventually he threw it in the garbage.

Desperate now, he grabbed his keys and climbed on his bike; he'd cruise aimlessly, maybe a new occupation would come up; the entire yard was completely free of weeds, even the neighbour's flowerbeds within Gunner's arms reach over the fence had been weeded; and the fish in the pond had been terrorized all day yesterday by Gunner reorganizing their aquatic plants \_again.\_

As he rode, Gunner found his attention drawn to his arms. The entire Expendables team had loved Tool's drawing of Kenzie the Valkyrie, and everyone had committed to getting it tattooed on their person, just like the black raven and skull of the Expendables logo. Gunner, Lee and Barney were already done, and Kenzie, who started slowly back at the tattoo shop last week, had started on Toll, Smilee and Luna. Gunner had gotten his Valkyrie ink on his left inner forearm, and as he rode, he decided to put something on the now conspicuously bare inner right forearm. Kenzie wouldn't be there, she'd worked yesterday on Smilee; Gunner watching her sadly from the corner of the shop as he, Lee, Toll, Caesar and Doc played cards; his mind only half on the playful banter of his team-mates. Once done the outline, Kenzie had sat back, said something that made Smilee laugh, and accepted his one-armed hug easily. She was making real progress with everyone but Gunner, Dr. Fellows prediction having become agonizingly true. She seemed almost back to normal with everyone else, but would still freeze or blush, a faint tremor in her limbs, around Gunner.

Mid-afternoon, Gunner pulled up to the shop. The roll-door was closed, indicating that Tool had a customer he was working on, so Gunner stepped through the man door beside it. Once inside, he paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust from the bright sunlight outside.

"Hey brother!" He heard Tool call.

"Hey Tool." He threw back, then stopped.

Kenzie lay on her side on the table in front of Tool, getting inked. Slowly, tempted to turn around and leave, Gunner walked over, trying not to let his eyes rove over Kenzie's bare side too much. She lay on her right side, right arm tucked under her head. Kenzie had lost weight after Brazil, becoming too skinny in Gunner's eyes; but she'd gained it back slowly and now filled out her jeans oh so sweetly again. Her waistband was pushed down a few inches and her Alice Cooper tank top was pulled up, tucked into a purple bra. Gunner wondered idly if that was the purple bra with little skulls on the cups or the one with flowers. Tool was sitting at her side, outlining the Valkyrie on Kenzie's left ribcage. Gunner didn't miss the symbolism. The left side of Kenzie's ribcage had been shattered by Saulter, seven ribs broken in seventeen places and had been the physical injury that had taken the longest to heal, even longer than the stab wound in her abdomen that Paul said should have killed her. Gunner knew from the dinner and movie nights that until just a few days ago, Kenzie's ribs had always been paining her by the end of the day.

"Hi Gunner." Kenzie said shyly.

"Sit down, brother. Take a load off." Tool said, jerking his chin at a nearby chair, winking at Gunner.

Gunner pulled the chair over, sat down by Kenzie's head. She smiled tentatively, then lifted her left arm from where it had been resting along the back of her head and held it out to him. Equally as hesitant, Gunner enfolded Kenzie's hand in his, her's disappearing in his much larger palm. He rested his hand on the edge of the table, squeezed her fingers gently. When Kenzie didn't tense or pull away he slowly began to stroke the back of her hand with his thumb, a relaxed smile forming on Gunner's face.

"How's your pain level darlin'?" Toll asked.

"Had worse." Kenzie replied, a tentative grin on her face as she met Gunner's eyes. He grinned back, his heart soaring.

After a few minutes of peaceful silence, Tool began to hum and grinning, Kenzie joined him until Tool lifted the gun, fixed her with a stony glare and said, "stop moving, honey."

"Ooops," Kenzie murmured sheepishly at Gunner. He grinned and with a 'watch this' wink began to hum the same song loudly, carefully two beats off from Tool.

"Shut up, you big gorilla." Tool growled, kicking out at Gunner distractedly.

Gunner chuckled and turned his attention back to Kenzie, surprised to see her gazing at him fondly. He smiled down at her, gently lifted her hand and touched it to his lips.

"Alright, sweetheart, you're done." Tool announced, wiping over Kenzie's side once more, then taping a folded section of paper towel over the design. "You know the routine, leave this on an hour, no scratching. We'll look at it next week to see when we can start filling it in." He reached up and gently pulled her shirt back down.

Gunner leaned back, pulling carefully on Kenzie's hand to help her sit up. Kenzie stood, gently pulled her hand free from Gunner's and smoothed her shirt down. She turned and walked towards the kitchen.

"I'm hungry, you guys want a sandwich?" She called over her shoulder.

"Yeah, I could go for one." Tool replied, cleaning up.

"I'll help you." Gunner said, following. Tool grinned at his back.

The kitchen was a small affair that, until Kenzie had come into their lives, been solely the room that held the beer fridge. Once Kenzie had settled in New Orleans, she'd cleaned and reorganized the kitchen, adding another fridge for actual food. Before Brazil, she'd cooked for the team often, but hadn't made any big meals since. The team nonetheless had kept the fridge stocked in her absence, anticipating her return.

Kenzie was rooting in the fridge when Gunner entered and, pulling what she needed out, stood and smiled at Gunner.



"You want one too?"

"Yeah, baby." Gunner breathed.

Flushing her cheeks at Gunner's tender nickname, one she hadn't heard in so long, Kenzie reached across the counter to the bread box. "I forgot...can you grab the ham out of the fridge?" She asked, opening jars and laying out three plates with bread.

"Yeah." Gunner scooted past her to the fridge. The kitchen was long and narrow, with little room for more than one person to manoeuvre, especially if one of those people were Gunner's size.

Grabbing the plate of sliced ham, Gunner lifted it out of the fridge and over Kenzie's head, setting it at her right side. Finding himself almost directly behind Kenzie, Gunner trailed his hand from the plate and, unable to help himself, encouraged by her earlier friendliness, gently rested it on Kenzie's right hip, where her shirt had pulled up and exposed a few inches of smooth skin. His skin tingled at the contact and, intoxicated, he slowly encircled Kenzie's shoulders gently with his left arm, lowering his head into her hair.

Kenzie dropped her head forward with a sigh, resting her chin on Gunner's forearm. "Gunner..." she breathed, her breath warming his skin.

Gunner turned his head to nuzzle into her hair, hand tightening on her hip. He pulled Kenzie back against him and touched his lips to her throat. Suddenly Kenzie tensed, inhaling sharply. With a jerk, she pulled free of Gunner's arms, whirling to face him, eyes wide.

"Kenzie?" Gunner asked, confused.

"I'm sorry, I ... I'm sorry." Tears threatening, Kenzie spun and dashed out.

"Hey! Where you goin', darlin'?" Tool called.

"Gotta run, Tool!" Kenzie choked, slamming the door behind him.

Tool appeared in the kitchen doorway. "What was that about?"

Gunner shook his head.

## 7. Chapter 7

**\*\*A/N: Thank you for the reviews, especially \*\*pgbl\*\* for the encouragement, don't worry :) , just a little bit longer!\*\***

**\*\*Also, chapter 9 contains a rather graphic passage where Kenzie gives Gunner some 'trouser love' lol. I think its worth the M rating. Do you guys want to read the original version, or have me PG it down a bit? Let me know what you want!\*\***

"I'm gonna go." Gunner stalked past Tool to the door, disbelief mixing with anger. \_Stupid bastard, \_he berated himself, stepping out of the shop and reaching his bike. \_You just had to push it, \_he started the bike, pulled away. \_Couldn't be happy with the progress,

had to fuck it up. Good job, Kenzie's probably regressed right back. \_His thoughts dark, circling and nipping. Gunner drove home, not trusting himself to stop anywhere without causing trouble.

Roaring up his driveway Gunner parked the bike and stomped up to the house. His new kitten, Turk, sensing his owner's foul mood, yawned from his bed on top of the fridge and returned to sleep. Pacing on the deck overlooking the bayou did nothing to soothe Gunner's nerves, his thoughts continuing to race with grim predictions of how badly he'd just messed up whatever little chance he'd still had with Kenzie. Finally giving into the temptation of oblivion, Gunner stalked back to the living room and opened the liquor cabinet, fishing out the half-empty bottle of vodka he's not touched in months. Selecting an LP at random from his newly reorganized collection, Gunner flicked on the turntable and dropped the needle. Not bad, some earlier Black Keys. Gunner settled on the couch, took a swig of vodka, only to stand back up again with a growl when 'I'll Be Your Man' started and his thoughts clamoured to remind him that in all likelihood, he was no longer Kenzie's man.

"Goddammit. " He grumbled, grabbing a Motorhead at random without looking at the cover and dropping the needle, letting Lemmy's unique British growl fill the air. He was just getting lost in the album when 'Dirty Love' started.

"Motherfucker!" Gunner growled, jumping to his feet again. One memorable night, driving home from a movie, 'Dirty Love' had come on the radio and Kenzie had pulled her LandCruiser over with a screech of brakes and climbed over into Gunner's lap. Before he'd even been able to ask what the hell she was doing, Kenzie had lifted her skirt, unzipped his jeans, freed his cock and lowered herself down on him.

"What the fuck?" He'd gasped, rapidly overcome with the sheer eroticism of the attack.

"This song always does it for me." Kenzie had moaned in his ear, stripping off her shirt to reveal that she was fully commando tonight and pulling Gunner's head down into her breasts. She'd rode him hard and fast to a simultaneous orgasm then, almost primly, returned to the driver's seat and drove away.

\_Christ, \_rock hard from the memory, Gunner yanked Motorhead off the turntable and, more carefully this time, selected a third record. There, a neutral album, AC/DC - Blow Up Your Video. With a groan, his crotch painfully tight, Gunner sat back down. He knew from miserable experience gained in the last three months that jerking off would do nothing to release the pressure and frustration knotting him up inside. Taking another huge swallow of vodka, he settled back and glanced sideways at the armchair across the room.

"Jesus Christ." He moaned, quickly looking away but it was too late. Apparently tonight, the Grey Goose was conspiring to drive Gunner crazy, throwing open the doors to his most dirty memories of Kenzie. One of her favourite games, and one Gunner loved to play as well, was to push him down into that very armchair, turn on some sexy song - Rob Zombie's Pussy Liquor was a favourite - and dance a striptease before straddling Gunner for toe curling armchair sex.

With a snarl, Gunner threw the vodka bottle across the room, watching

with satisfaction when it shattered on the far wall. Determined now to drink away these memories quickly, before he'd get a chance to find his phone, Gunner dug into the cabinet again, triumphantly pulling out a full bottle of Jack Daniels. Breaking the seal, he took a long pull, swaying slightly; his tolerance for alcohol apparently gone with three months of grim sobriety. The fact that he'd just put away half a 2-4 of vodka in the last half hour on an empty stomach surely contributed, but at this point, Gunner didn't care. The sooner he blacked out, the better.

\* \* \*

><p>Kenzie pulled away from Tool's shop with a screech of brakes, shifting gears quickly, double-clutching.<p>

"Sorry, old boy." She apologized to her old Toyota as she ground between second and third gear. \_What the fuck, \_she berated herself, slamming her hands on the wheel. \_What's your problem? It felt good, didn't it? You've missed Gunner, more than you even really understand, so why the hell did you run? \_Kenzie's thoughts snapped and snarled, circling her like a rabid animal. \_It's been three fucking months, get it together. But you know what, headcase, it's probably too late. That little cocktease stunt you just pulled probably pissed him off for the last time. He's not going to wait forever for you. Gunner's done with you, he's going to find some girl without all the baggage. Good job, you just screwed up the best thing you've ever had.\_

This angry, violent voice had been Kenzie's constant companion these past three months, despite Dr. Fellows attempts to help her resolve her guilt. 'It's not your fault,' he'd tell her, 'you need to go easy on yourself, you've done nothing wrong and made amazing progress. Give yourself some credit.'

In the last week or so, Kenzie had been successful at dampening the voice, was overcoming it, replacing it with a more forgiving, kind commentary, but it had come screaming back to her as she accelerated for home. She hated the voice, knew it was both dangerous and unhealthy, not to mention unfair, but since Brazil, she'd had such a hard time. Every time she thought she was relaxing, getting better, Saulter's scarred face would appear in her mind's eye, sneering at her as he held her down, raping her again and again as she screamed. Just now, feeling Gunner behind her, his hand gripping her hip, his arm warm around her shoulders and his masculine scent; musk, motor oil and leather, enveloping her; Kenzie had felt so relaxed and peaceful. Old stirrings had begun, she'd just been about to turn in his arms and crush herself to Gunner's broad chest when that familiar milky-eyed sneer had leered at her and cold panic had taken over. She'd panicked, jerked out of the suddenly constricting embrace, and just as quickly, Saulter's image had dissolved, leaving her facing a confused Gunner. Embarrassed and frustrated, Kenzie'd turned tail and ran, and now regretted it. Without remembering the drive, she now found herself in her driveway, engine ticking. With a frustrated moan, Kenzie slammed the Cruiser's door and stomped to the house. Ruger, her personal protection dog, met her as she opened the front door.

A few weeks after Brazil, Toll had come to her and mentioned that he had a friend who bred, raised and trained protection dogs and did Kenzie want to meet him? Kenzie had jumped at the opportunity, still

afraid to be home alone and not wanting to inconvenience the team by having them stay over all the time, although any one of them would have, no questions asked. Toll's friend, an ex-military gentle giant named, of all things, Tiny, had matched her to Ruger, a two year old Rottweiler he'd specially trained for personal protection and he'd been her constant companion since.

"Hey buddy," Kenzie cooed, dropping to her knees. She and Ruger had bonded instantly, and she felt 100% safe home alone now. After a quick cuddle, Kenzie dashed upstairs and changed into leggings and a sports bra, hustled down into her basement gym, Ruger following. A few weeks after Brazil, Luna, Lee, Smilee and Thorn had set up an elliptical and treadmill in Kenzie's basement; and Luna had introduced Kenzie into gentle exercising, not for physical recovery, but for mental peace. Kenzie found that an hour on the elliptical did wonders at calming her thoughts. Doc had added meditation about a month ago and that was definitely helping calm Kenzie's guilt and anger.

An hour later, Kenzie's side was sore, but her thoughts had calmed, that angry voice having retired to it's cave to bite on its own foot for awhile, and Kenzie returned to her master suite to shower, fashioning a waterproof cover out of saran wrap for her side. A long hot shower relaxed her further and, finally hungry, she reheated some seafood pizza from the fridge and put in a chick flick.

A few minutes later, Kenzie ejected the disc. The leading man was tall and blonde, and although that's all he had in common with Gunner, it was enough to jumble her thoughts again. Finally, she threw in the first Lord of the Rings, hoping fantasy would distract her; Viggo Mortensen wouldn't hurt either. Ruger settled in beside her, resting his head on her ankle.

In disgust, Kenzie turned the DVD off halfway through, she'd forgotten until now that the last time she'd watched this had been with Gunner, and he'd laughed at the Hobbits until Kenzie'd tackled him and told him to shut up. Gunner had wrestled her down easily and tickled her into submission, the tickles quickly turning into heavy petting and ending in sex bent over the back of the couch.

"For shit's sake." Kenzie muttered. No use tormenting herself, she'd screwed this up royally; her days of play wrestling with her blond giant were over. Turning back to the TV, she half-watched the Spike Channel, reading the same pages of the new paperback she'd bought over and over again. Despite being 60 pages in, Kenzie would be hard pressed to explain plot, setting or any characters and with a groan, tossed the book on the table, turned off the TV and stomped upstairs. After introducing her to meditation a month ago, Doc had helped Kenzie set up the spare bedroom upstairs as a meditation chamber, and she headed there now. Dimming the lights, she settled on her heels in the middle of the room and firmly tapped the edge of the Tibetan singing bowl set on the low table in front of her, then picked up the necklace of Mala beads beside the bowl and closed her eyes. Like Doc, Kenzie didn't subscribe to any specific form of mediation, just picked and chose what worked best for her. Not quite an hour later, Kenzie opened up her eyes again, feeling more relaxed than before. Wincing slightly, she stood and left, deciding to go to bed.

A few minutes later, Kenzie climbed into her king-size bed, bought to share with her mammoth man and now sadly over-sized for just one

person; well, one person and one dog, Ruger often ended up stretched out at the end, whimpering and chasing rabbits in his dreams. Despite her relaxation earlier, Kenzie soon found herself tossing and turning, dozing fitfully, but always jolting awake again. Gunner's side of the bed was too empty, too cold without him. The flip numbers on her retro alarm clock moved far too slowly for Kenzie, and finally, at 3:18 am, she gave up and climbed out, having reached a decision.

Reaching for her favourite tank top, a Metallica t-shirt of Gunner's she'd swiped and modified, she pulled it on then shimmed into clean jeans. Grabbing her keys off the table, she paused, leafing through the legal paperwork scattered there. Kenzie had visited a real estate agent earlier this week and the papers were a finalization of sale. \_New York, \_she thought, \_full circle.\_

The streets were deserted, she made good time and within minutes had pulled up to her destination. Gunner's house was dark, but his truck and bike were in the driveway. The key was still where it had been before and Kenzie let herself in quietly.

"Gunner?" She called softly.

A meow answered her, a half-grown kitten trotting up to her. "Hey, kitty." Kenzie grinned, reaching down and picking him up. "Turk, huh? Didn't know Gunner'd gotten a cat." She set the cat back down and he ran to his empty dish, meowing hungrily. After opening a few cupboards, disoriented; had Gunner reorganized his entire kitchen? she wondered, found cat food and filled his dish, topping up the water.

That done, Kenzie continued into the living room. LPs lay scattered everywhere, there was a dark stain on the far wall with a pile of shattered glass on the floor underneath it, and oddly, Kenzie's favourite armchair was covered with a blanket and turned to face the wall. \_What the hell was Gunner doing?\_ Loud snores told Kenzie that Gunner was asleep in the bedroom and, as she entered, the stink of whiskey told her he'd passed out. Gunner lay face down, spread-eagle on the bed. An empty bottle of Jack in his right hand, his left hand curled tightly into Kenzie's pillow, a picture frame resting beside his hand. Quietly Kenzie moved to the bed, picked up the frame. It was her favourite picture, a selfie she'd taken in the hammock outside, her smiling up at the camera, Gunner with his head turned, eyes closed, tenderly kissing her cheek. Gunner had passed out staring at this picture tonight.

Carefully, Kenzie sat on the bed beside the sleeping mercenary. "Gunner?" She called quietly. Gunner snorted but didn't wake. Kenzie reached out, gently rested her hand on his upper thigh, just below his ass. "Gunner." She tried again, gently shaking her hand. Gunner mumbled and turned his head towards her, but remained sleeping. Grinning, he was going to have a wicked hangover, Kenzie squeezed his leg and said louder, "Gunner, wake up."

With a groan, Gunner opened his eyes and stared blearily at Kenzie. Surprised he raised his head. "Kenzie? Baby, what are you doing here?" He mumbled, struggling upright, giving up halfway and supporting himself with one hand, turning his body to face her. "Are you okay?" He asked, concerned.

"I'm fine, I came by to tell you something."

Gunner waited, biting his lower lip. Kenzie had never seen him look so miserable.

Knee-walking towards him, Kenzie reached out and gently cupped Gunner's cheek with her hand. Closing his eyes with an almost inaudible moan, Gunner leaned his head into her palm, a tear streaking down his cheek.

"What did you want to tell me?" He whispered.

**\*\*A/N: I hope you're enjoying Gunner's Last Christmas so far!\*\***

**\*\*I have two story paths in my head right now. Path 1, Kenzie cuts all ties with the Expendables and moves back to New York, where Gunner may or may not follow her. Maybe he goes out on a job with the team with no intentions of returning alive...or Path 2...Kenzie stays...\*\***

**\*\*Review please and tell me which story path you'd like to see!  
;)\*\***

End  
file.